

A CLOSER LOOK

By Ron Wilson



Whitetail fawn

DON'T TOUCH

A whitetail fawn born on the Northern Plains in June weighs about 6 pounds, is dotted with irregular rows of white spots for camouflage, and doesn't smell much to predators in the first hours of life.

Sometimes these defenses aren't enough to protect fawns from wild predators, or good-intentioned humans who "rescue" the animals from their tall-grass hideaways because they appear to have been abandoned by their mothers. In most cases, the young haven't been deserted, and mom is likely watching discretely nearby, waiting for intruders to move on.

It's illegal to take wild animals home, and captive animals later returned to the wild, scientists say, will struggle to survive because they do not possess learned survival skills. The best advice – and this goes for all wild baby animals – is to not touch them.

A doe will often move her young twice a day for about the first month of life, trying to stay one step ahead of predators. She will also visit a couple times a day to nurse. These visits are short, reducing the chance of her young being discovered.

A misconception, wildlife biologists say, is that once a fawn is touched, the doe will not take it back. What is true is the fawn that is removed from the wild faces a bleak future.

Female rabbits make a nest by scraping out a shallow depression in the ground, lining it with grasses and fur. Young are born naked, blind and nearly helpless. But they develop rapidly, enabling mom – not dad, a deadbeat that is never around – to move from the nest and eat. So, if you stumble upon a hideout full of cute bunnies, move on because mom, like the whitetail doe, will be back.

The same care should also be afforded to neighborhood-nesting songbirds. If a young bird falls, or is pushed, out of its nest, it should be left alone. Biologists say the only time a person should pick up a baby songbird is if it's found on their doorstep. Then it should be moved nearby to suitable habitat.

Things happen in the wild for a reason. Young are purposely isolated from their caregivers to be given a better chance to dodge animals that want to eat them. And sometimes, despite the best nature-made camouflage and nearly odorless beginnings, the cute get found.

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